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THE ROLE OF SCHOOL DISTRICT REORGANIZATION IN IMPROVING RURAL EDUCATION.

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RESEARCH ON SCHOOL DISTRICT REORGANIZATION VERIFIES THAT LOCAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS OPERATE AS A FUNCTION OF THE STATE. AS REORGANIZATION RATES HAVE BEEN TOO SLOW, THE EVIDENCE SUGGESTS THE NEED FOR STATE LEGISLATIVE MANDATES FOR COMMUNITY-TYPE SCHOOL DISTRICTS. FOR IMPROVED UTILIZATION OF CONTEMPORARY KNOWLEDGE OF EDUCATION IN PROVIDING RICHER AND BROADER EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS, BETTER ADMINISTRATIVE LEADERSHIP, BETTER TEACHERS, BETTER FACILITIES, AND LARGER SCHOOL DISTRICTS ARE REQUIRED. (SF)

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ABSTRACT

Rural school reorganization is more than a century old. It represents one major method to achieve equality and adequacy of educational opportunity required by rapidly changing socio-economic conditions. The result has been the reduction of one-room rural schools from 200,000 in 1918 to 15,000 today, and the reduction of administrative districts from 128,000 in 1932 to 36,000 today.

The American people have learned that reorganized and larger districts and schools provide richer curricula, utilize more equipment, libraries, and laboratories in more functional school buildings, utilize a better prepared teaching and administrative staff, and achieve better educational results at more reasonable per pupil costs than non-reorganized and smaller school districts. Finally, they have learned during more recent years that reorganization is greatly facilitated by simple legislative study, proposal, and ratification procedures, strong state and local lay and professional leadership and state financial support for transportation and capital outlay.

INTRODUCTION

As the nation in recent years has become more urbanized, and as attention is focused upon the growing problems of our cities, a fact quite obvious to all observing Americans, there has been a tendency to forget that there is a large segment of our rural children and youth who are poorly educated, unemployed, or underemployed. For many decades, specialists in rural education have been aware of problems of rural education, including those problems centering around a disproportionate number of the nation's children to be educated in rural areas, a disproportionately small share of the nation's income with which to educate such young people, coupled with sparsity of population which makes small schools and transportation and ensuing expense a continuing and difficult problem. The first awareness of this whole series of problems under the title of "Rural Education" had its origin, nationally at least, as long ago as 1909 in the report of the Theodore Roosevelt National Country Life Commission. Rural educators for many years have been studying, proposing solutions to these problems, and providing leadership for the improvement of education for rural children and youth. One of the ways that has long been known to improve the education opportunities of rural people has been to organize better units of school administration and attendance. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to show how school district reorganization has and can improve educational opportunities for rural people.

Rural education is, of course, the education of rural people. But who are rural people? The U. S. Census classifies as rural all persons who live on farms, in the open country, or in villages and towns of fewer than 2500 population. Since this is a rather narrow definition, the rural population is here defined to include all those who live in the open country, in villages or towns and who are primarily dependent on their immediately surrounding resources for the base of their economic life. These resources may be soil, lakes and fisheries, mineral resources, timber and forest products, or even a summer resort climate. 9/

It must first be understood that education is a state function and a state responsibility. It has always been so in the United States, even though in Colonial times and, to a certain extent, today, there was a tendency for some to think of the public school as a local institution. Education is so important to all the people of the state, however, that in broad outline educational policies, practices, structures, and procedures, must be determined by all the people of the state acting through their adopted constitutions and their legislatures as they organize such agencies, state, intermediate, and local, and assign such functions to each of them as will best serve all the people of the state. Each of these three levels of school government performs only such educational activities and functions as are constitutionally and legislatively assigned to it.

Mort and Reusser have stated that the principle of state responsibility carries with it:

1. The supremacy in school matters of state regulation over city home-rule charter;
2. the status of all school officers as state officers no matter how appointed;

3. the responsibility of local school officers to all the people of the state rather than just to the people in the locality;

4. the prudential responsibility of school agencies of statewide jurisdiction in protecting the interests of all the people in individual school districts. 18/

Thus, most state constitutions specify that the legislature must provide for a system of free public schools open to all the children of all the people.

Acting under these broad general grants of authority, legislatures have generally created three levels of school government. One of these is the state level where there is a state superintendent of public instruction, either popularly elected or appointed by some governmental agency, and assisted in statewide policy formation by a state board of education in most states. The second level is the intermediate district level, usually the county, in which there is a county superintendent of schools, either appointed by a county board of education or elected by the people. The third level of school government is the local school district, usually governed by a local board of education and, if it is a twelve-grade district, supervised and administered by a superintendent of schools appointed by that board. It is at this local level that the day-by-day operation of schools takes place. All three levels of school government have responsibilities for rural education.

There are at the local level two units of school organization with which we are here concerned. One of these is the district itself, a quasi-legal corporation whose functions are derived from state constitutions and state school legislation. The other is a subdivision of this administrative district called a school attendance unit. This paper is concerned, not with the state or county intermediate units of school government, but only with these two local units of school government.

THE HISTORY OF SCHOOL DISTRICT REORGANIZATION

The history of the reorganization of school districts in the United States can be given here only to the extent of showing the background of the movement and the present trends. Probably the first reorganization of local school districts took place in 1843 when the City of Detroit consolidated a large number of separate districts into one city district under a single board of education. Abel has stated that the history of the growth of consolidation of schools and transportation of pupils may be divided into four fairly well defined periods. He listed these as follows:

1. From about 1840 to 1880, a period in which the principle of centralization of schools was established in urban communities, extending to other independent districts, and begun in rural sections.

2. From 1880 to 1894, a period of very slow extension of the consolidation idea.

3. From 1894 to 1910, a period of awakened interest in rural schools, a general rapid enactment and betterment of consolidation and transportation laws, and more extended use of them.

4. From 1910 to 1922, a period of more united effort in bringing about consolidation, determining its value, and working out the best ways to make it most effective. 1/

There probably are two periods in which the movement may be divided since Abel's analysis of 1923. These may be defined as follows:

1. From about 1923 to 1945, a period in which the principle of state assistance for school district reorganization and consolidation of attendance units became established with financial support from state sources for school bus transportation and capital outlay.
2. The period from 1945 to the present, characterized largely by the direction of the movement through county-wide surveys to determine the best arrangement of territory into school districts, the approval of such proposed plans by a state agency, and the ratification of the proposals by popular vote with the ratification legalized by either a total majority vote of the proposed area or a majority vote in villages and cities plus a majority vote in strictly farm territory.

According to Monahan, 17/ "The first consolidation for the definite purpose of securing for the children better educational opportunities appear to have occurred in Montague, Massachusetts, in 1875." The second was probably established in Concord, Massachusetts, in 1879. A central building was constructed to replace several one-teacher schools. The city and the township covered approximately 25 square miles. Before the consolidation was effected there had been twelve teachers in eleven school buildings. In the consolidation, the number was reduced to two village districts and five rural districts. Some of the pupils were transported to the central school at public expense in horse-drawn vehicles, one of the earliest examples of state-paid transportation coming under the Massachusetts law of 1869. This was the first law that provided state funds for transportation to consolidated schools.

Some magnitude of the reorganization movement may be appreciated if it is recalled that in 1918 there were nearly 200,000 one-teacher schools operating in the United States. 14/ By that time, approximately 7,500 consolidated schools had been established. 2/ By 1935-36 the number of one-teacher schools had been reduced to 131,101 with 17,531 consolidated schools established. To the nearest thousand, the number of one-teacher schools in 1948 was 75,000 and in 1961 it was only 15,000. 4/

As a whole, the continental United States has made considerable progress in the last thirty years in reducing the number of local school districts. To the nearest thousand, the number of districts in 1932 was 128,000; in 1948 it was 106,000; in 1953 it was 67,000; and in 1961 it was 36,000. 4/

There were in 1961, therefore, only 28 percent as many districts as existed in 1932, and only 10 percent as many one-teacher schools as there were in 1930.

Another measure of this historical progress is the noticeable increase in the number of districts having forty teachers or more. In 1948, there were 4,330 such districts. In 1953 there were 5,478, and in 1961 there were 6,492 districts having forty teachers or more. 4/ This was approximately a 50 percent increase.

PRESENT STATUS OF REORGANIZATION

As of 1961 there were still in existence in the United States 36,402 legally organized school districts. In these school districts there were still operating 15,018 one-room rural schools. In 1961 there were 4,677 legally constituted school districts that did not operate any school. These districts either did not have any pupils or sent their pupils as non-resident, tuition-paying pupils to a school in another district. Approximately 81 percent of all of these non-operating school districts were located in seven midwestern states, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota.

The current scene also shows that in 1960-61 there were 16,551 districts, 45.5 percent of the total, operating with nine teachers or fewer. There were also in that same year 6,492 districts, approximately 17.8 percent of the total, operating with forty teachers or more. 4/

There were 18,480 districts that operated elementary schools only, and 1,179 districts operating secondary schools only. There were 12,091 that operated both elementary and secondary schools. 4/

Between the period June 30, 1960, and July 1, 1961, there were only 223 reorganization proposals which were defeated and 1,940 which were approved. 4/

An analysis of the current status, therefore, indicates that it would be a matter of judgement as to whether or not the school district reorganization movement is taking place repidly enough to provide the kind of education at reasonable cost needed by today's rural children and youth. Many educators would say that the rate of progress is much too slow.

Perhaps the most common deficiency of the local reorganization process is that it does not produce districts of adequate size. In 1953, Fitzwater summarized some of the characteristics of reorganized districts in eight states. His data showed that of the 552 districts studied, the average number of component districts per reorganized unit was 15.3, the median area was 90 square miles, the median total population was 3,142, their village centers were usually smaller than 2,500 people, their median pupil enrollment was 626. 13/

Chisholm 6/ summarized similar data for school district reorganization in Illinois and showed that the average number of teachers in 244 reorganized districts was 32, and the median enrollment of 216 of these reorganized districts which operated only one high school was 162. Their average area was 103 miles. He concluded in a Missouri study that, although the median high school enrollment in the reorganized districts increased from 261 to 393 pupils, reorganization had little effect in eliminating the small high school.

The almost century-long experience with school district reorganization in the United States has produced a considerable body of knowledge as to what procedures are effective and what procedures are relatively ineffective. Much of this has been well summarized by Fitzwater. 12/ One of these is a clearer understanding today than existed twenty years ago on the relationships between the reorganization of school districts and the financing of education. It was

recognized more than twenty-five years ago that one of the most powerful factors influencing school district reorganization, either to encourage or to discourage the process, was the state's policy regarding financing of schools through local and state revenues. More recent studies have shown this influence in greater detail.

For example, in 1952 Chisholm and Cushman 7/ reviewed more than 200 separate research studies, commission reports, and state surveys dealing with the relationship between finances and district reorganization. Among their more important conclusions were:

1. As the size of the school becomes larger, up to a certain limit, the quality of its educational program generally becomes more satisfactory and the per-capita cost of its educational program generally declines.
2. The per-capita cost of education and the quality of the educational program are generally considered unsatisfactory in elementary school attendance units having fewer than 175 to 200 pupils and high school attendance units having fewer than 250 to 300 pupils, except as the cost is greatly increased.
3. Satisfactory lay and professional leadership and adequate administrative services are generally not found in school districts having fewer than 40 teachers.
4. The alternative to satisfactory local school district reorganization, unsatisfactory as that alternative is from the point of view of sound educational policy, is increased state or intermediate district control; and, conversely, school district reorganization of the right kind makes possible a higher degree of control over education by the parents whose children are being educated in various communities in the state.
5. Evidence seems to indicate that the state and local finance program is one of the most powerful factors, if not the most powerful factor, in encouraging or discouraging school district reorganization, although the school finance program alone is not a guarantee that an efficient organization of local school administrative units and attendance units will become a reality within a reasonable period of time.
6. School district reorganization is greatly facilitated by (a) a state equalization program that guarantees a minimum foundation program for current expense, (b) an adequate program for the payment of pupil transportation cost, (c) an equitable program for capital outlay payments, (d) prevision for the interim payment of the tuition for non-resident pupils in such a way as not to reward inefficient school district organization, (e) a pregram for the equitable distribution of the assets and liabilities of former school districts in a reorganization program.

Perhaps it might be helpful if all the factors which encourage or discourage school district reorganization were listed. Obviously, if the people of a community or state wish to reorganize their school districts they should eliminate as many of the negative and impeding factors as possible and should strengthen as many positive and encouraging factors as possible. Several studies have looked at this problem of ferreting out the impeding and facilitating factors, but one of the best summaries has been made by King in his study of the experience in school district reorganization in Kansas.

In this searching and comprehensive study, King 16/ suggested eleven factors that facilitate school district reorganization and twenty factors that seriously impeded the process. King analyzed the influence of these factors on the process of reorganization in Kansas up to about 1950. The most influential impeding factors related to transportation, localism, fear of loss of local control, and failure of the people to understand the purposes and the complexity of reorganization. Diversity of wealth and taxes among the districts ranked well down his list. The most influential facilitating factors pertained to lay leadership, easy and simple legislative and studies procedures, a history of closed school attendance patterns, better financing and better education in the enlarged school districts, professional leadership and state stimulative financing, particularly as related to transportation and capital outlay.

King concluded that reorganization was a process in which a number of preconceived ideas were sufficiently strong that in some cases they could block factors involving objective, popular, and professional judgement. He felt that positive financial stimulants were needed, that lay leadership and professional guidance at both state and local levels were necessary, that greater emphasis should be placed upon educating the public, and that the problem was so important and the need for better districts so urgent that the democratic process for effectuating better district struction should be greatly accelerated.

The present writer has gone a step farther than this in his recent publication, "The Questionable Theory of Local School District Reorganization." 8/ After reviewing some forty to fifty studies on the process of school district reorganization, this writer feels that the present status in terms of adequacy of districts produced, the rate of the production of adequate school districts, the lack of state financial stimulation for capital outlay and transportation, all called for legislation which was not merely permissive but which would actually, after a statewide survey, legislate new community-unit type school districts by the state legislature.

PROJECTIONS OF NEEDED REORGANIZATION

The demands of the times today are such that the schools that were good enough for today's rural children and youth. The socio-economic changes which have taken place in rural America in the last twenty years have been so stupendous that if everything were done in organizing better districts that is now known, it still would probably not be enough. More than fifteen years ago, Taylor 21/ and his associates documented a number of social and economic changes taking place in the rural life of the UNited States. These include the following:

1. Lessening of rural isolation.
2. Commercialization of agriculture.
3. The move from hoe farming to mechanized farming.
4. The trend from folk beliefs and practices to the use of science in agriculture.
5. The shifting of processes of farm products from farms to factories.
6. The loss of folk arts and skills.
7. The increase in part-time farming.
8. The decreasing proportion of the population in rural areas and on farms.
9. The decline in the operation of the agricultural ladder with an

accompanying greater investment for a young man to get started in farming.

10. The declining status of hired farm workers.
11. The rising levels and standards of living in rural areas.
12. Decreasing rural-urban differences.
13. Changing methods of obtaining security.

Other socio-economic-political changes not documented by Taylor and his associates because of their recency, are the growing population of the world, increasing at the rate of 135,000 people per day, and the growing interdependence of all the nations of the world. Another explosion is the tremendous increase in scientific knowledge. It is said that scientific knowledge doubles every ten years, medical knowledge doubles every seven years, and that 90 percent of all scientists who ever lived are living today. These have tremendous implications for better teachers, better curricula, and better districts to provide for the education demanded by today's young people, rural and urban alike.

The magnitude of the job remaining is evidenced by the very large number of districts maintaining elementary schools only, by the very large number of districts which maintain no schools, and by the very large number of districts unable to provide a complete twelve-grade program of education at a time when many communities are looking forward to community junior colleges in the thirteenth and fourteenth grades. Few educators would hazard a guess as to the number of districts which the country ultimately should have when reorganization of all the territory of the nation into twelve-grade school districts was completed. Certainly, much remains to be done when one views the midwest which has only 9 percent of the nation's children, 42 percent of the nation's school districts, 81 percent of all non-operating districts, and 53 percent of all districts providing elementary education only. 4/ Certainly, much remains to be done when the present procedures produce reorganized districts half of which are not even then satisfactory.

The American Association of School Administrators, looking to the future, has, however, made the following statement: "As school districts decrease in number, so too will superintendencies. Many professional educators believe that the day will come when no more than 5,000 local superintendents, and perhaps as few as 500 intermediate unit administrators, will be needed." 4/ These 5,000 school districts are only one-seventh as many school districts as the nation has today.

EDUCATIONAL ADVANTAGES OF REORGANIZED DISTRICTS

Educators and lay people alike believe that larger reorganized districts are more effective educationally and more economical financially than the component districts from which they were made. This has been evident in hundreds of studies for the past fifty years. Indeed, so thoroughly is the reorganized district accepted in these terms that almost no reorganized districts have ever reverted to the original component district status, despite legal provisions in many states which make it possible for them to do so.

It is generally recognized that the educational program is richer and broader in reorganized districts, both at the elementary and secondary levels. Larger districts make larger attendance units possible, and the pupil population base generally is large enough to justify enough teachers to provide adequate curricula at a reasonable cost. Larger districts have a larger and more stable

financial base and utilize not only their own funds but state revenues and grants to local school districts more effectively. Reorganized districts large enough to employ 30 to 40 teachers generally have more continuous, highly-qualified, educational leadership. Larger districts and larger schools generally have better prepared and more experienced teachers who are more able to utilize their specialized training. Larger districts and larger schools generally have better school plants with larger school sites and playgrounds, gymnasiums, better equipped and larger libraries, laboratories, and classrooms. Larger districts generally have better citizen participation in the determination of educational policies, the election of more highly qualified board members, and provisions for adult education and community participation in the school's program. 3/

Indeed, so well known are these advantages that recent research has not been devoted to any widespread determination of the values of school district reorganization. Research in recent years, instead, has been devoted to finding more effective ways of securing better organized districts. However, a few studies are cited showing the educational advantages of reorganized and larger schools as evidence of the foregoing statement. As long ago as 1937 Seyfert 20/ in his study of six-year secondary schools found that ability grouping and broader, more differentiated curricula were found in larger schools. The studies by Fitzwater, 11/ previously cited, showed that elementary schools in reorganized districts were more likely to have arts and crafts, music, science, and foreign language. These schools also were more likely to have well-prepared supervisors, testing programs, audio-visual aids in the classrooms, health clinics, a centralized library, and better pupil accounting. Other improvements in elementary schools were noted by Endres 10/ in reorganized districts in Illinois. These included use of teachers in special subjects, establishment of kindergartens, and elementary school physical education. These schools were characterized by increased parent participation and understanding.

Studies show that in secondary education the larger the school the greater is the variety of subjects available and the richer is the curriculum. For example, Barr, Church, and McGehey 5/ showed that in Texas a high school with 200 pupils had 11 subjects, a high school with 201 to 500 pupils had 18 subjects, and schools having over 500 pupils offered 27 subjects. Woodham's study 23/ of the six-year secondary schools of Florida showed that courses increased in number at a rapid rate to 450 pupils, less rapidly but still increasing, from 450 to 750, and very little increase occurred after that figure. In his study of the 832 secondary schools in Iowa, Peck 19/ concluded that "although size of school and cost per pupil were both reliable predictors of quality of education, size was seven times as important as cost." In another Iowa study, this on elementary school-size-cost relationships, Theophilus 22/ concluded that "the contribution of size of school and cost per pupil in the production of quality of education in the elementary schools of Iowa within the noted size range was at the ratio of 49 to one." In Indiana Kent 15/ studied nine reorganized districts having a high school in each but which had 23 former high schools in them. He saw the nine high schools as better than the 23 in the breadth of their studies offered, the quality of their school plants, longer school terms, a decrease in teacher turnover, and a noticeable increase in the percentage of teachers who were teaching in only one, rather than several subjectmatter fields.

This and other evidence that school districts, and schools, of adequate size are much more likely to produce higher quality education is important for the welfare of children and youth in rural areas, Such schools retain young people in school longer, keep them off the labor market longer, release them better prepared to avoid the ranks of the unemployed whether they remain in rural communities or seek further education in colleges, technical institutes, or employment in larger urban places. Technology and automation have reduced greatly the need for huge blocks of unskilled labor since what an unskilled laborer can do a machine can do better. It can even do better many types of work requiring high levels of human abilities. Never in all history has it been so important to make sure that every individual was educated to the maximum of his native potential. Never in the history of American education has it been more clear that larger districts and larger schools are one of the surest means for rural people, and the nation, to realize this democratic ideal.

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